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Hewing a Station out of the African Jungle

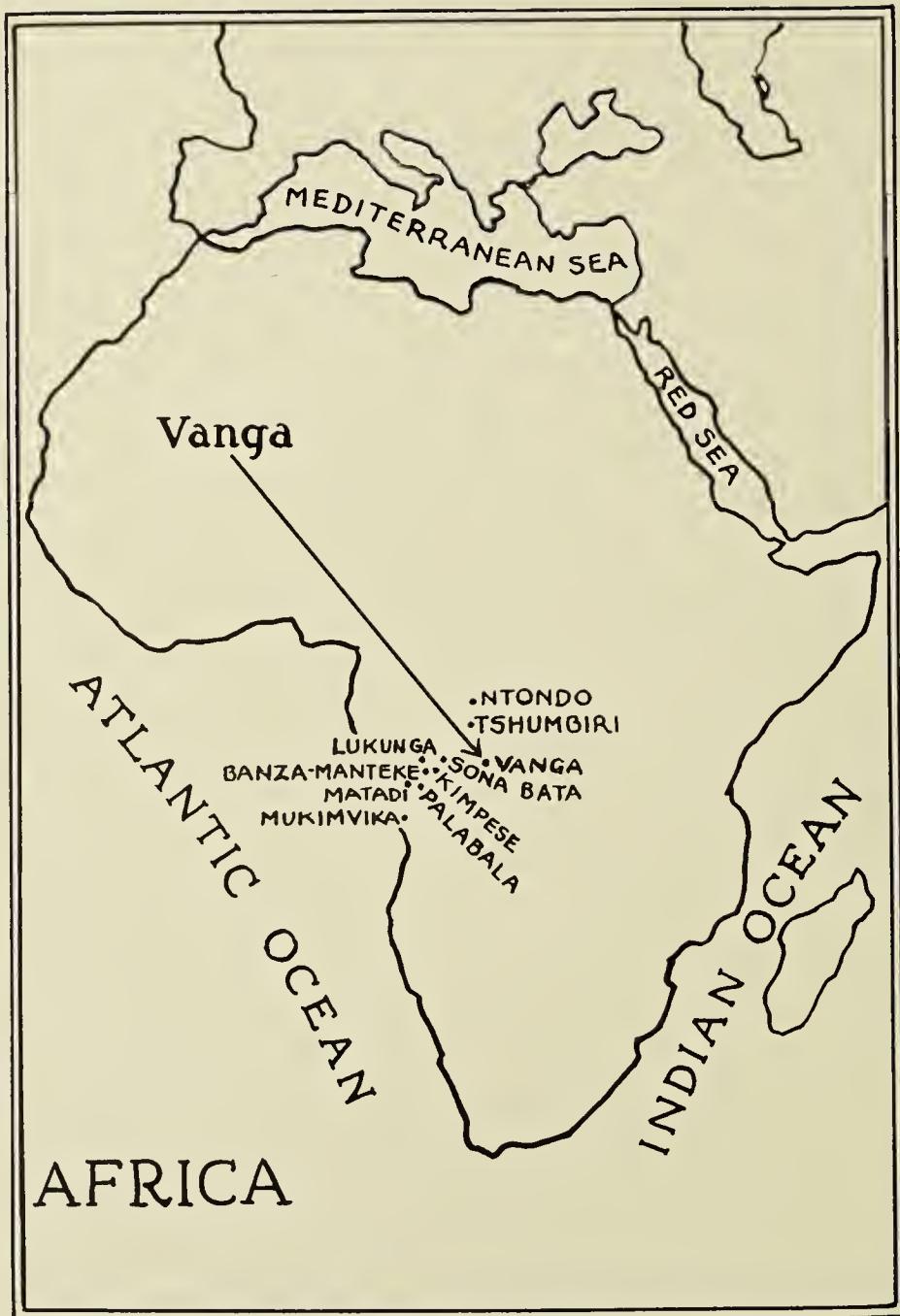
by P.H.J. Lerrigo

HEWING A STATION OUT OF THE AFRICAN JUNGLE

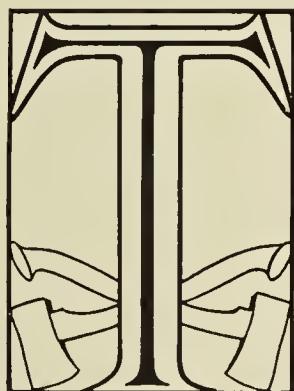
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Hewing a Station out of the African Jungle



WO axes, a saw, a hammer, a box of nails, two bales of cloth, and ten sacks of salt comprised the working equipment with which Dr. W. H. Leslie hewed Vanga out of the primitive African jungle. With this meager outfit he attacked the tangled mass of underbrush and interlacing creepers which bind together age-old jungle giants and form with them Congo's menacing denial to the pioneering onslaught of the missionary. He forced his way up the declivity of the bank of the river Kwilu and, despite brush-nurtured tsetse fly and ubiquitous mosquito, bit by bit pushed back the wild forest until he had won the broad sweep of a splendid plateau from the wilderness.

This is not ancient missionary history, for its beginnings date from the year 1913. The forbidding mass of vegetation reared itself above the river-bank

and cast its heavy shadows over the water. Beyond the fringe of forest skirting the river lay cannibal villages absolutely untouched by the gospel and very little acquainted with the white man and his ways. The first day's clearing yielded little more than space for the tent on the beach, but day after day the two axes and the saw cut deeper into the intricate mass until the summit was reached, and then the hammer and box of nails came into play. In the brief period which has intervened since its opening, the station has spread over the entire plateau. Its twenty-one wattle-and-mud buildings include the homes of the missionaries, the church, the school, the dispensary, the carpenter-shop, the houses for schoolboys, the girls' dormitory, the printing-shop, and the guest-house. It presents an attractive and orderly village crowning the rise from the river, with plaza, main street, and pineapple-bordered avenue running backward between plantations of manioc, coffee, and bananas to the main road leading to the native village.

This attractive base, wrested from endless miles of prevailing wilderness, is merely the starting-point from which pioneer journeys have carried the message far and wide through hundreds of miles of plain and forest, until no less than fifty villages have responded to the call and welcomed both gospel preaching and the establishment of schools.

Eight days distant a main outpost has been established in the village of Moanza which, while dependent for direction and encouragement upon the station of Vanga, has itself become a center of power and light. Twenty-two additional village schools and preaching services are under the care of Mpambu, the vigorous African leader whose story is told elsewhere.

The little bush school is a primitive establishment. Its home is usually a grass-thatched native hut, its equipment a few slates and a primer or two, and its presiding genius a young lad whose own mental furnishing takes him little beyond the Bible stories and long division; but it is these little village schools which furnish the introduction to the mystery of letters, awaken the desire for a fuller life, and point the way to better and larger things. The trail which leads the missionary over the hills and plains to the cluster of native huts with Bible and school book, turns back upon itself when the unrest of untried possibilities takes possession of the heart of the youth of the village, and one day a group of boys manifestly not urban in their appearance, equipped with a yearning for knowledge and little else except a piece of cloth varying in size from a few inches to a yard draped artistically amidships, make their appearance at the main station to enter the boarding-



BUILDING THE MISSION HOSPITAL AT VANGA

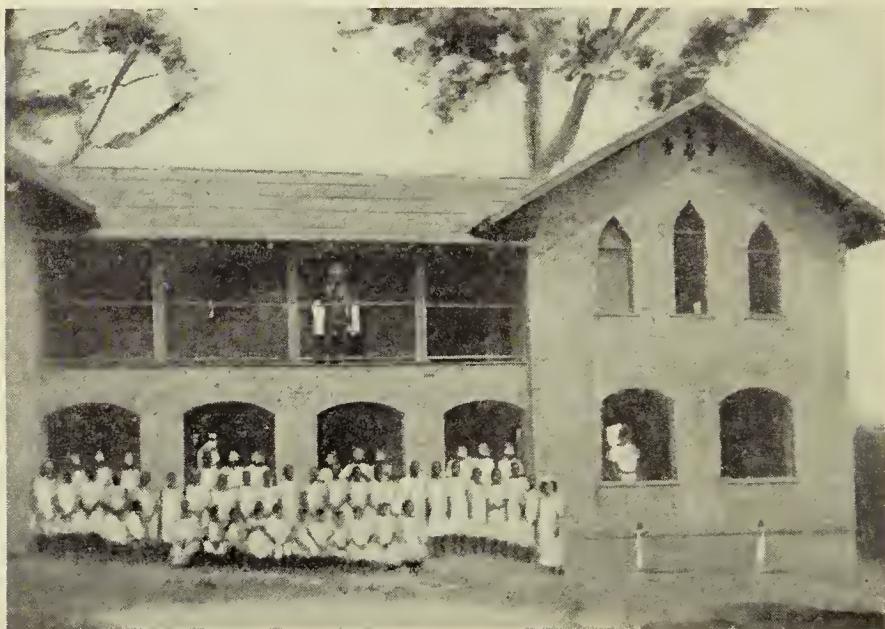
school. These lads receive an invariable welcome and as they are perfectly capable of working for a living they do not become a charge upon the mission, but vary their wrestlings in the schoolroom with equally strenuous exercises in the forest and manioc patch. The physical equipment of the station, houses, shops, roads, fences, gardens, owes itself to the industry of the schoolboys in their desire for learning. And every new enterprise becomes a new educational factor. If houses are to be built lumber is required, and the white man goes into the forest with saws and men, emerging with a supply of sawed planks and a company of expert sawyers. Bricks are needed; he takes another group of lads, locates a

clay bank, and dabbles in it. Perhaps to the missionary himself the task may have been little more than an academic theory previously, but slowly forms are made, kilns are erected, and bricks materialize, while brickmakers and bricklayers are produced in the process.

There are now more than two hundred boys and young men at Vanga Station. Both school building and chapel are filled to their capacity with classes, and those who cannot find accommodation within pursue their scholastic work on a bench out under a tree. There are classes of small boys and girls learning to read from charts in monosyllables, ba, be, bi, bo, bu. There are others beginning to add and subtract. There are larger youths struggling with the mysteries of the first reader in their own language or languages, for three are in use. The classes in mathematics occasionally go as far as fractions, and the subject is then known as "the study which causes trouble for the head." Each of these classes is under the leadership of a more advanced scholar who may not be either the largest or eldest by any means. Most astonishing of all is a group of young men who are grappling with French, and who repeat in quite understandable manner such profound phrases as *Ou est mon chapeau?* and *Le chat est sur le table.* Far from despicable progress has been made by some

of them, and knowing, of course, nothing of their native tongue, the writer had the satisfaction of communicating directly with some of them by means of the simple French sentences they have learned.

Educators everywhere will agree, however, that all of education is not comprised in the schoolroom, and even primitive educational institutions are not exempt from the disturbances caused by love's young dream. The young men gathering at Vanga speedily made known to their teacher that they were betrothed, and moreover that they were anxious that the village belles, upon whom social custom and the wishes of their uncles had decreed that their youthful affections



THE GIRLS' DORMITORY AT VANGA

should be set, should receive similar educational advantages to those which they themselves were enjoying.

This presented to the missionary a serious problem, but in the fashion of missionaries everywhere he immediately recognized in it a new opportunity, and at the opposite side of the village under the protecting wing of the home of the single woman missionary, Miss Grage, he caused to be erected another building of the prevailing bamboo-and-clay type to shelter such young girls as the missionaries were able to induce to come to the station. There are now fifty-five of these young ladies and all of them engaged. Let the imagination dwell upon it. Fifty-five engaged couples upon one station with Cupid panting from overwork and fatigue under a tropical sun. But these young people have other matters to occupy their attention than love-making. The day's activities begin at sunrise or a little before. The girls are led in companies to their work in the gardens which they weed and plant with manioc. The boys and young men have previously done the heavier spade work and are now away at their house-building, brick-making, or other tasks. The girls continue through the day, alternating industrial and domestic studies with book work in the schoolroom. What with the busy activities of the day, the work, the



CHRISTMAS DOLLS IN BELGIAN CONGO

study, the preparation and consumption of the meals, and in the afternoon the merry games in which all join, the boys in their own precincts and the girls in theirs, the complications of propinquity are avoided. Moreover, it may be noted that the girls range from ten years old upward. Proper occasions for meeting between the boys and girls are arranged under suitable oversight. The boys have the satisfaction of knowing that the future partners of their joys and sorrows are being cared for and trained against the day when they are ready to take a wife, and the girls

blossom happily into a richer and fuller life than ever could have been theirs under the social conditions of the heathen village.

This system of wife and husband training has already been working at Vanga for some years, and not a few young couples have been graduated into a happy home life and useful Christian service. It has given rise to another unique institution. Behind the mission station a little farther up the hill, separated from the compound by coffee and manioc patches, is a model village built by the graduate young couples. No one is permitted to locate in the village except Christian young couples who have gone through the schools. Each young man builds a house for his bride. They are on a uniform plan, square in outline, have two commodious rooms, are constructed of wood and clay, and have properly fitted doors and windows. The roof is of grass. Each has its own enclosure with a garden where grow paypays, bananas, sweet potatoes, manioc, peppers, and other vegetables. Chickens are found in almost every yard, and there is an occasional goat. The houses face each other on the two sides of a wide, cleanly swept street. The interiors of the houses are neat and clean and are furnished in some cases with tables and chairs. All have beds and mosquito-nettings. Considerable effort has been put forth by the owners to make them

attractive. Behind each house is a small cook-house of lighter materials. When the young people marry they join the village and commence their married life under favorable Christian surroundings which enable them to avoid entanglements from the first with the old vicious customs of the heathen village. Some of these young couples are even learning to eat together, a very great departure from ancient custom, but a practise which will do much to favor the establishment of the Christian home as we know it.

After some consideration the boys chose the name



COMING HOME FROM KINDERGARTEN

of Belge for their little village. They look forward to establishing their houses there with a great deal of pleasure, and it proves an incentive to good work during their school career. The young couples are encouraged to remain in Belge only for a year or two, until family habits are established. They then return to their own village, carrying with them the riches of a new understanding, an enlightened heart, cleanly habits, and better methods of living.

The situation at Vanga has been described in some detail as it is a fairly typical instance of the creation and development of a mission station. It must be borne in mind, however, that similar efforts varying only in manner and detail are now being carried on far and wide throughout the Congo territory. There are now 534 missionaries at work in the territory covered by the General Conference of Protestant Missionaries, and all of them are devoting themselves to the establishment or development of such stations. The significance of the movement is difficult to gauge. Unquestionably it is profoundly affecting the life of the country. Social abuses such as cannibalism, fetishism, polygamy, are being greatly mitigated, the power of the witch-doctor is waning, the poison ordeal is disappearing, tribal wars are far less frequent. New moral ideals are being established, ideas of cleanliness are replacing the older

filthy living conditions, the native is raised from a mat on the floor to a chair, books begin to unfold their secrets to the child mind of the people, and above all a positive, sin-conquering, Christ-revealing faith is taking the place of the ancient religion of terror and degrading superstition.

Since the foregoing was written much progress has been made at Vanga station. Dr. Leslie's own son, H. Richards, has spent three years at the station and with his trained engineering knowledge has replaced some of the mud-and-wattle buildings with permanent brick structures. King Albert of Belgium has appointed a sleeping-sickness commission, which after thoroughly investigating the Kwangu area, has removed many of the villages which lay in the lower regions infested by the tsetse flies, to higher areas. Dr. Leslie has cooperated with this government commission in its valuable work on behalf of the natives and as a result of his long service to the Congo people was recently decorated by King Albert as a Chevalier de l'Ordre Royal du Lion.

Following in the wake of the sleeping-sickness commission Dr. Leslie visited every one of the new villages and established a native teacher or preacher at each point. More than 150 villages are now cared for in this way.

It has been found possible to place at the outpost

of Moanza an American missionary family, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hill, and the efforts carried on so heroically for a decade by Samuel Mpambu are now being reenforced and extended. Mr. and Mrs. Hill have given more than 30 years of successful effort to the work in Congo and Samuel Mpambu himself, the pioneer at Moanza, was one of the young men who came early under their teaching.

The staff at Vanga has been reenforced so that it is now possible to carry on a much more vigorous evangelistic and educational work in the entire Kwangu area. Dr. Leslie's recent letters report a new spiritual awakening among the people of that section.

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